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# THE PASSING OF THE HERO

WHEN Shaw wrote his *Arms and the Man* he aimed a stout blow at the romantic conception of the professional soldier. Instead of a hero on horseback, charging valiantly against enormous odds, shouting grandiloquent phrases concerning Victory or Death, he pictured a competent sort of man who regarded war as a job of work to be performed as efficiently as possible, but in the end if the immediate objective was hopeless, he was quite content to save his own skin, and leave the heroics to others. As an officer, who has seen much service in France, has put it: "The best medal any man can bring out of this war is his identity badge."

In the present war there is overwhelming evidence that men have fought as bravely and have sacrificed themselves as freely as at any time during history. Thermopylæ, where the spirit of "*Ils ne passeront pas*" was first embodied, has been multiplied a thousand times at Verdun and elsewhere; and the courage of the most doughty Berseker, who ever gathered the foemen's spears to his breast, has been outmatched in innumerable instances by unknown clerks and peasants, who have charged impregnable machine-gun emplacements. Nevertheless, the soldier apparently is far from regarding himself as a hero, or that war is anything but an unpleasant and untidy job which he would like to get done with as soon as possible, although he is none the less brave and competent for taking this viewpoint.

Of all the books which have been written about the war from the soldier's point of view, none nears a stamp of authenticity equal to that of Henry Barbusse's *Le Feu.**

It was the opinion of many at the outset of the war that, while war was to be deplored, yet there was a certain degree of compensation in its refining and spiritualising influence; that, as a high adventure, it would ennoble mankind. Indeed, we have been told by many—probably fat editors safely past the draft age—that even allowing for the waste, the ruin and the vast accumulation of human agony, yet, on the whole, when the balance sheets come to be struck, the discipline of soul and body would be well worth the cost to mankind.

No one, however, can read Mr. Barbusse's pages without being impressed by the pitiful absurdity of this reasoning. We have here pictured the wretchedness, the sordidness, and the misery of much of the soldier's lot; of the fighting-men's preoccupation with the means of obtaining food, warmth, shoes and other clothing, wine and an occasional spree; of their haunting desires for the white arms of women. Not that they are any less effective, in consequence, about their work of soldiering; indeed, nearly all of the squad's motley crew are decorated for brave deeds in battle.

"We aren't soldiers," says big Lamuse, "we're nothing but men." And that is the keynote of Barbusse's book.

Men, men in the street, roughly torn out of their life. Average men taken haphazard out of the mass, they are ignorant, not enthusiastic, shortsighted, full of

* *Under Fire, the Story of a Squad*, by Henri Barbusse. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

rough common-sense that sometimes runs off the rails; willing to be led, and to do as they are told, enduring of hardship, capable of suffering for long.

Simple men, who have been still further simplified, until by force of circumstances only their primitive instincts are emphasised; the instinct of self-preservation, the tenacious hope of life, the pleasures of eating, drinking, and sleeping.

Here we have sanity, clear-sightedness, and intellectual honesty.

The subjoined chapter from *Le Feu* is as typical as any, and is well adapted to give the reader an insight into the psychology of the *poilu* as recorded by Barbusse.

It is five o'clock in the evening. Three men are seen moving in the bottom of the gloomy trench. Around their extinguished fire in the dirty excavation they are frightful to see, black and sinister. Rain and negligence have put their fire out, and the four cooks are looking at the corpses of brands that are shrouded in ashes and the stumps of wood whence the flame has flown.

Volpatte staggers up to the group and throws down the black mass that he had on his shoulder. "I've pulled it out of a dug-out where it won't show much."

"We have wood," says Blaire, "but we've got to light it. Otherwise, how are we going to cook this cab-horse?"

"It's a fine piece," wails a dark-faced man, "thin flank. In my belief, that's the best bit of the beast, the flank."

"Fire?" Volpatte objects, "there are no more matches, no more anything."

"We *must* have fire," growls Poupardin, whose indistinct bulk has the proportions of a bear as he rolls and sways in the dark depths of our cage.

"No two ways about it, we've got to have it," Pépin agrees. He is coming out of a dug-out like a sweep out of a chimney. His gray mass emerges and appears like night upon evening.

"Don't worry; I shall get some," declares Blaire in a concentrated tone of angry decision. He has not been cook long, and is keen to show himself quite equal to adverse conditions in the exercise of his functions.

He spoke as Martin César used to speak when he was alive. His aim is to resemble the great legendary figure of the cook who always found ways for a fire, just as others among the non-coms, would fain imitate Napoleon.

"I shall go if it's necessary and fetch every bit of wood there is at Battalion H.Q. I shall go and requisition the colonel's matches—I shall go——"

"Let's go and forage." Poupardin leads the way. His face is like the bottom of a saucepan that the fire has gradually befouled. As it is cruelly cold, he is wrapped up all over. He wears a cape which is half goatskin and half sheepskin, half brown and half whitish, and this twofold skin of tints geometrically cut makes him like some strange occult animal.

Pépin has a cotton cap so soiled and so shiny with grease that it might be made of black silk. Volpatte, inside his Balaklava and his fleeces, resembles a walking tree-trunk. A square opening betrays a yellow face at the top of the thick and heavy bark of the mass he makes, which is bifurcated by a couple of legs.

"Let's look up the 10th. They've always got the needful. They're on the Pylônes road, beyond the Boyau-Neuf."

The four alarming objects get under way, cloud-shape, in the trench that unwinds itself sinuously before them like a blind alley, unsafe, unlighted, and unpaved. It is uninhabited, too, in this part, being a gangway between the second lines and the first lines.

In the dusty twilight two Moroccans meet the fire-questing cooks. One has the skin of a black boot and the other of a yellow shoe. Hope gleams in the depths of the cooks' hearts.

"Matches, boys?"

"Napoo," replies the black one, and his smile reveals his long crockery-like teeth in his cigar-colored mouth of moroccan leather.

In his turn the yellow one advances and asks, "Tobacco? A bit of tobacco?" And he holds out his greenish sleeve and his great, hard paw, in which the cracks are full of brown dirt, and the nails purplish.

Pépin growls, rummages in his clothes, and pulls out a pinch of tobacco, mixed with dust, which he hands to the sharpshooter.

A little farther they meet a sentry who is half asleep—in the middle of the evening—on a heap of loose earth. The drowsy soldier says, "It's to the right, and then again to the right, and then straight forward. Don't go wrong about it."

They march—for a long time. "We must have come a long way," says Volpatte, after half an hour of fruitless paces and encloistered loneliness.

"I say, we're going down hill a hell of a lot, don't you think?" asks Blaire.

"Don't worry, old duffer," scoffs Pépin, "but if you've got cold feet you can leave us to it."

Still they tramp on in the falling night. The ever-empty trench—a desert of terrible length—has taken a shabby and singular appearance. The parapets are in ruins; earthslides have made the ground undulate in hillocks.

An indefinite uneasiness lays hold of the four huge fire-hunters, and increases as night overwhelms them in this monstrous road.

Pépin, who is leading just now, stands fast and holds up his hand as a signal to halt. "Footsteps," they say in a sobered tone.

Then, and in the heart of them, they are afraid. It was a mistake for them all to leave their shelter for so long. They are to blame. And one never knows.

"Get in *there*, quick, quick!" says Pépin, pointing to a right-angled cranny on the ground level.

By the test of a hand, the rectangular shadow is proved to be the entry to a funk-hole. They crawl in singly; and the last one, impatient, pushes the others; they become an involuntary carpet in the dense darkness of the hole.

A sound of steps and of voices becomes distinct and draws nearer. From the mass of the four men who tightly bung up the burrow, tentative hands are put out at a venture. All at once Pépin murmurs in a stifled voice, "What's this?"

"What?" ask the others, pressed and wedged against him.

"Clips!" says Pépin under his breath, "Boche cartridge-clips on the shelf! We're in the Boche trench!"

"Let's hop it." Three men make a jump to get out.

"Look out, *bon Dieu!* Don't stir!—footsteps——"

They hear some one walking, with the quick step of a solitary man. They keep still and hold their breath. With their eyes fixed on the ground level, they see the darkness moving on the right, and then a shadow with legs detaches itself, approaches, and passes. The shadow assumes an outline. It is topped by a helmet covered with a cloth and rising to a point. There is no other sound than that of his passing feet.

Hardly has the German gone by when the four cooks, with no concerted plan and with a single movement, burst forth, jostling each other, run like madmen, and hurl themselves on him.

"Kamerad, *messieurs!*" he says.

But the blade of a knife gleams and disappears. The man collapses as if he would plunge into the ground. Pépin seizes the helmet as the Boche is falling and keeps it in his hand.

"Let's leg it," growls the voice of Poupardin.

"Got to search him first!"

They lift him and turn him over, and set the soft, damp and warm body up again. Suddenly he coughs.

"He isn't dead!"—"Yes, he is dead; that's the air."

They shake him by the pockets; with hasty breathing the four black men stoop over their task. "The helmet's mine," says Pépin. "It was me that knifed him, I want the helmet."

They tear from the body its pocket-book of still warm papers, its field-glass, purse, and leggings.

"Matches!" shouts Blaire, shaking a box, "he's got some!"

"Ah, the fool that you are!" hisses Volpatte.

"Now let's be off like hell." They pile the body in a corner and break into a run, prey to a sort of panic, and regardless of the row their disordered flight makes.

"It's this way!—This way!—Hurry, lads—for all you're worth!"

Without speaking they dash across the maze of the strangely empty trench that seems to have no end.

"My wind's gone," says Blaire, "I'm ——" He staggers and stops.

"Come on, buck up, old chap," gasps Pépin, hoarse and breathless. He takes him by the sleeve and drags him forward like a stubborn shaft-horse.

"We're right!" says Poupardin suddenly. "Yes, I remember that tree. It's the Pylônes road!"

"Ah!" wails Blaire, whose breathing is shaking him like an engine. He throws himself forward with a last impulse—and sits down on the ground.

"Halt!" cries a sentry—"Good Lord!" he stammers as he sees the four poilus. "Where the—where are you coming from, *that* way?"

An exuberant reaction excites and bewitches them. All talk at once. In haste and confusion they act again the drama which hardly yet they realize is over. They had gone wrong when they left the sleepy sentry and had taken the International Trench, of which a part is ours and another part German. Between the French and German sections there is no barricade or division. There is merely a sort of neutral zone, at the two ends of which sentries watch ceaselessly. No doubt the German watcher was not at his post, or likely he hid himself when he saw the four shadows, or perhaps he doubled back and had not time to bring up reinforcements. Or perhaps, too, the German officer had strayed too far ahead in the neutral zone. In short, one understands what happened without understanding it.

"The funny part of it," says Pépin, "is that we knew all about that, and never thought to be careful about it when we set off."

"We were looking for matches," says Volpatte.

"And we've got some!" cries Pépin. "You've not lost the flamers, old broomstick?"

"No damned fear!" says Blaire; "Boche matches are better stuff than ours. Besides, they're all we've got to light our fire! Lose my box? Let any one try to pinch it off me!"

"We're behind time—the soup-water'll be freezing. Hurry up, so far. Afterwards there'll be a good yarn to tell in the sewer where the boys are, about what we did to the Boches."